

# Individual Careers in the Contemporary Organizations: A Natural Selection Perspective

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**Abstract:** *Work organizations in the 21st century are becoming more agile in their characteristics, processes, actions and interactions while individual careers are becoming skill-seeking experiences through flexible arrangements. Thus, the bargaining power of individuals in their own careers seems to be diminishing, and yet organizations are increasingly attracting skillful human resources. This reveals the self-productive and selective nature of individual careers in contemporary organizations, which adopt new or non-traditional designs. Despite the range of writings on individual careers in recent times, research focusing on the self-productive and complex nature of individual careers and their selectivity in contemporary organizations seems to be scarce in the existing literature. Adopting a theoretical approach, this study examines the nature of new designs of contemporary organizations, and the new career outlooks of their employees. Drawing from the natural selection perspective, the complexity theory and the autopoiesis theory, the present study develops a model for understanding how individual careers are selected in contemporary organizations*

**Keywords:** *Individual career, contemporary organizations, new designs, natural selection, complexity, autopoiesis.*

## 1. Introduction

Organizations during the last two decades have evidenced an intense phase of structural evolutions invoking nimble and flexible work arrangements (Skorstad & Ramsdal, 2009) in response to changing social, economic and technological conditions at local as well as cosmopolitan levels. These structural changes have accommodated downsizing, rightsizing, outsourcing, merging etc. (Shapiro, 2008) and have resulted in significantly out-broken forms such as, network, virtual, cellular, modular, self-designing, intelligent, and boundaryless organizations (Palmer et al., 2007). Thus, new forms have emerged, reflecting the agile nature of ever-evolving organizations while incorporating the inconsistencies and instabilities in their processes and functions, and recognizing the ambiguities, uncertainties, irrationalities and complexities in all relations and interactions (Voudouris, 2007; Zeytinoglu & Cooke, 2002). Subsequently, such organizations of the day seem to be out-breaking the modern, traditional and bureaucratic configurations in overall design and work arrangements (Daft, 2012).

Parallel to the changes in organizational forms, their processes and functions, the values, interests, expectations and ambitions of the individuals who are engaged in those work settings under such social, cultural, political, economic and technological conditions have been evolving over time. Thus, inherently, the flavors of the new generations at the contemporary workplace have been changing over time. The newest forms in organizations together with the shifted flavors of the workforce have questioned the traditional individual career at organizations, not only for their progression and for their paths at the process level but also for their meaning and purpose at initiation (Sullivan, 1999; 2001). As a result, individual careers in contemporary organizations

have taken an entirely a different perspective, commanding organizational theorists, practitioners, human resource specialists, and individual workers to re-envisage their nature and character. Despite a burgeoning literature on new organizational forms and the evolving spheres of new career models, there seems to be a lacuna in the knowledge on how individual careers are selected and maintained under such evolving conditions.

However, several macro level theories have provided explanations to the query of how the environment is involved, as the decision maker analyzes, selects, and retains the most appropriate competitive elements from a cluster. Drawn from the natural sciences, the population ecology model (Hannan and Freeman, 1977) and the autopoiesis theory (Luhmann, 1995) have attempted to theorize this answer at the organizational level. The individual career, seen from the organizational viewpoint, stands to be a natural whole which evolves through a lifetime. Thus, in the light of the natural selection perspective, the present study attempts to understand the logic of selection and retention of individual careers in the contemporary non-traditional workplace.

In the sections to follow, by delineating the nature and characteristics of contemporary non-traditional organizations and the individuals of new generations, I examine the theoretical developments in the current research on career. Drawing insights from three existing and well established theories in organizational studies; namely, population ecology, complexity theory and autopoiesis theory, I derive theoretical underpinnings to conceptualize the nature of the individual career in contemporary organizations. Through these reviews, I present a conceptual model, which posits the major concepts drawn here. Then I conclude with a discussion of implications for organizational practitioners, theorists and HR professionals, directing avenues for future research.

The originality and the significance of the present study lies in several points. First, the conceptualization of the individual career is grounded on biological stances. Therein,, the application of population ecology, complexity theory and autopoiesis has been novel in career theory. Moreover, it has made career theory more comprehensive with insights from organization theory. Also, new insights have been shed on career theory, opening intellectual debates in human resource management theory and practice

## 2. Agile and Flexible Designs of Contemporary Organizations

The newly emerging forms of organizations at the contemporary workplace show some specific characteristics that distinguish them from the traditional structures. They are flatter and decentralized structures, organic in nature, with authority based on capability, team oriented, with strong employee involvement and quick responsiveness to environments (Daft, 2012).

Absence of stable patterns and fixed structures is a basic feature of these organizations. Rather than the predictable patterns and order, they welcome inconsistencies and instabilities in their processes and functions (Cooper and Burrell, 1988). The comparison of traditional and non-traditional organizations is depicted in Table 1 below.

TABLE I: Comparison of The Characteristics of Traditional And Non-Traditional Organizations

Element compared	Traditional Organization	Non-traditional Organization
Structure	➤ Hierarchical	➤ Networked/virtual
Resource focus	➤ Capital	➤ Human/information
Personnel focus	➤ Managers	➤ Professionals
Learning focus	➤ Specific skills	➤ Broader competencies
Basis of action	➤ Control	➤ Empowerment to act
Direction to employees	➤ Management command	➤ Self-management
Basis for compensation	➤ Position in hierarchy	➤ Accomplishment/achievement
Key drivers	➤ Reward/punishment	➤ Commitment
Individual desire	➤ Satisfying superiors	➤ Achieving team / individual goals

Source: Adopted from Clarke and Clegg (1998).

Accordingly, contemporary or new organizational designs, which attract new generations of the workforce, stand to be more flexible and hierarchy-free, thus heralding a new working life (Skorstad & Ramsdal, 2009; Rose, 2009).

## 3. Individuals in the new generations

At the same time, the new generations at the workforce of the day, along with the socio-cultural, economic, technological and political-legal changes at work places have been transforming into different personalities, which characterize more flexible, self-centered, continuously changing individuals (Mhatre & Conger, 2011). The nature of modern individuals, when compared to that of new generations, can be seen as in the following table (Table II).

TABLE II  
COMPARISON OF THE NATURE OF MODERN AND POSTMODERN INDIVIDUALS

Modern Individuals	New Generations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serious and rigid</li> <li>• More rational in behavior</li> <li>• Prefer permanent relationships</li> <li>• Collectivity oriented</li> <li>• More concerned with old loyalties and modern affiliations i.e. marriage, family, nation etc</li> <li>• Strong singular identity</li> <li>• Carefully organized</li> <li>• Coherent and unique reality</li> <li>• Comfortable with planned events</li> <li>• Fixed identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relaxed and flexible</li> <li>• Oriented towards feelings and emotions</li> <li>• Prefer temporary over the permanent</li> <li>• Individual oriented</li> <li>• Concerned with their own lives, personal satisfaction &amp; self-promotion</li> <li>• Absence of strong singular identity</li> <li>• Unrehearsed</li> <li>• Comfortable with multiple realities</li> <li>• Comfortable with spontaneous events</li> <li>• Fluctuating and ever-changing personal identity</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grown with an stable culture</li> <li>• Assume responsibility</li> <li>• Community based</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shaped up by the contemporary culture</li> <li>• No desire to assume responsibility</li> <li>• No unity in community</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Rosenau (1992).

Thus, non-conventional career patterns, supported by flexible work arrangements, have been visible in the young generations in developed economies (Lundy, Roberts & Becker, 2009).

#### 4. Recent Research on Individual Career

Career is defined as the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time. It has implied a constellation of views, that mean, in general, "any category of work (paid or unpaid) without making restrictions to a particular work setting, ignoring assumptions about career success, and considering both parallel work experiences as well as successive sets of experiences in discontinued fields of employment" (Arthur, 2008).

In the recent literature, extant models have appeared, accommodating diverse aspects contemporarily seen in individual careers. These have moved away from traditional conceptualizations, and been re-conceptualized in different ways, i.e, (a) shifting responsibilities of career management from employer to employee - protean careers (Mirvis and Hall, 1996; Hall et al., 1996); (b) shifting the whole career to an entirely different work setting - post-corporate careers (Peiperl and Baruch, 1997); (c) shifting boundaries in single organizations or occupations - boundaryless or boundary-crossing careers (Lips-Wiresma and Mcmorland, 2006; Sullivan, 2001); (d) shifting career patterns within the life span of individuals - kaleidoscope careers (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2008). While these shifts been identified as an eclectic mixture of concepts denoting the paradigm shift in career research, the following transitions (shown in Table III) can be noted as a confluence of organizational and individual thinking towards this end.

TABLE III  
TRANSITION OF VIEWS ON INDIVIDUAL CAREERS

Traditional View	Non-traditional View	Implication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity derived from employer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity derived from self or profession</li> </ul>	Self-concern/ Individual orientation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career in one/two organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career in multiple organizations</li> </ul>	Boundaryless career
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career managed by employer</li> <li>• Employer assess and promote upward</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career managed by individual</li> <li>• Self-marketable/ self-motivated</li> </ul>	Personal responsibility on own life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment stability</li> <li>• Fixed workforce</li> <li>• Perceive self as immobile</li> <li>• Long-term &amp; career oriented members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project-oriented work</li> <li>• Just-in-time workplace</li> <li>• Perceive self as mobile</li> <li>• Workplace as a market</li> </ul>	Prefer temporary over permanent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills are firm-specific</li> <li>• Competency is on technical skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills are transferable</li> <li>• Competency is on soft skills &amp; relational skills</li> </ul>	Multi-skilled with soft skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority for earning money</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority for fulfillment &amp; enjoyment</li> </ul>	Subjective achievements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment measured on seen in the workplace</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment measured through contributions done whenever &amp; wherever</li> </ul>	Virtual workplace

Source: Adapted from Dowd and Kaplan (2005), Shapiro et al. (2008) and Sullivan (1999)

The implications of these shifting views have been developed around knowledge and abilities constructed across multiple firms, portable skills, personal identification with meaningful work, on-the-job action learning, individual responsibility for career, and multiple networks and peer-learning relationships (Sullivan, 2001). Further, the psychological contract between the employer and the employee too has shifted to a different version from employee loyalty and job security towards employee performance and continuous learning and marketability (Sullivan, 1999). Meanwhile, the individual concern over their own career too has been shifted from objective determinants (pay, promotions, and other benefits) to more subjective determinants such as the meaning and the purpose of a particular career. Thus, the recent literature suggests that career success is a matter of marketability and employability of individuals rather than merely progressing up the hierarchy of a particular organization.

## 5. Selection And Retention of Contemporary Individual Career In Organizations

The coherent view arrived at through inextricable dimensions of recently developed theoretical constructs of individual careers, the postmodern outlook on new organizational forms, and the nature and characteristics of the individuals in new generations, evidently provide knowledge for conceptualizing the individual career in contemporary organizations with new designs.

### 5.1. Individual Career as a Natural Selection

The workforce in such configurations admittedly has to be characterized with marketability and employability with multi-skills, assuming responsibility of their own careers with devoted self-reliance, preferring subjective achievements therein, and refusing to be fixed to one organization or occupation throughout their careers. The organizations in their evolving forms continuously engage in a process of accommodating the most preferable participants from a competitive flow of competencies. Thus, the progression of individual careers will not even be a partial responsibility of an organization, as it is out of the hands of organizational decision makers.

The pervasive understanding (?) promotes the view that the individual career is shaped through environmental driving forces which assist the selection of the most appropriate individuals for the timely existing positions.

In contrast to the traditional view on the role of organizational decision makers in determining the survival of organizations, the population ecology model of organizations presented the view of natural selection, which emphasizes the role of the environment in deciding the survival of the best-fitted organizations (Hannan and Freeman, 1977). Thus, the environment makes the decision as to which unit should survive and which unit should die or disappear. Such a decision is a way of natural selection that follows a process of variation, selection, and retention of the most appropriate unit in the particular environment.

As far as the individual members of a unity (unity or unit?) acquire more and more skills, and become more competent and competitive, the environment becomes powerful in making the selection of the most appropriate members who should survive long in that unity.

In contemporary organizations with new designs, the personnel focus has been on professionals rather than managers; the learning focus has been on broader competencies rather than specific skills; the compensation has been based on accomplishments rather than positions; the key driver of individual action has been commitment rather than satisfying superiors. These features have revealed that the selection of suitable people for jobs and their progression is in the hands of external parties, but not that of the particular individuals or the individual organizations.

**Proposition 01:** The most appropriate people for the jobs will be (naturally) selected based on their own competencies within the given competitive environment.

## 5.2. Individual Career as a Self-production

The relational career or protean career (Hall & Mirvis, 1996) has been well theorized with an understanding of the decreasing responsibility and interest of the organization over individual career progression. Even the mentors in organizations are not completely able to involve themselves in the development of the individual career and instead they play a therapeutic role in career construction (Dissanayake, Herath & Takahashi, 2006). Thus, it sees the possibility of understanding the individual career as an autopoiesis.

Autopoiesis (self-production) is characterized by the creation of the system by itself (Luhmann, 1995). Such a system owns an identifiable boundary, which is produced by itself and establishes its own autonomy and identity. Autopoietic systems are operationally closed, and so, their structures are determined by the internal processes. In such a context, autopoietic systems do not adapt to pre-given environments.

**Proposition 02:** The contemporary career is self-productive.

## 5.3. Individual Career as a Complex Whole

Driven by the individual temptations leading to psychological success (Hall et al., 1996), people attempt to develop multiple networks and acquire multi-skills (Sullivan, 2001). In contract-based, assignment-type or project-nature jobs, individuals are compelled to move among jobs. As suggested in the kaleidoscope model (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008), and boundary-crossing or boundaryless career models (Lips-Wiresma & Mcmorland, 2008), individual careers are shifting around occupations and organizations. It suggests that individuals possess non-linear and disordered career paths throughout their life spans. Thus, it sees the possibility of viewing the individual career as a complex whole.

Complexity exists when there exists a deep sea of vast possibilities (Sherman and Schultz, 1998). Sherman and Scuhltz explain its appearance in entities combined in unpredictable ways that affect the way other entities combine and change (p.17). Citing from Yates, Backlund (2002) notes five attributes found whenever complexity arises: (a) significant interactions among parts, (b) high number of parts, degrees of freedom or interactions, (c) non-linearity, (d) broken symmetry, and (e) non-holonomic constraints. He further notes that every living system has a certain degree of complexity. The non-linearity of complex systems exists due to the unpredictable and time-dependent nature of their behavior (Marion, 1999).

The characteristics of individuals in new generations; have incorporated a preference for temporary relationships rather than for being permanently fixed and bounded to particular units; show the absence of a strong singular identity and instead is characterized by a fluctuating identity in its environment; unorganized and unrehearsed nature in activities; are growing with and are shaped by contemporary culture and ; are not tied to a stable culture. These can be highlighted as the characteristics of complex individuals, whose career becomes non-linear, involved in a diverse and high number of segments and relations with broken symmetry.

The lives of individuals of the new generations are not carefully organized, but instead unrehearsed and more comfortable with multiple realities. Thus, searching for a coherent and unique reality is not generally observed. Subsequently, their satisfaction with spontaneous events rather than with planned events and compatibility with the ever-changing cultural scenario further prove their complex nature.

The networked and virtual structure of organizations, the pressing need for information over all other resources and the stress on professionalism as well as on broader competencies have entrusted new generations with a more complex work environment that fits well with their characteristics.

As implied by the requirements of the new forms of organizations and contemporary developments in career theory, the individual career exhibits a complex pattern of inter-connecting individual competencies and possibilities. Thus, non-linearity, broken symmetry, a large number of possibilities, skills or competencies, significant interactions among those competencies, and non-holonomic constraints appear with such non-conventional careers.

**Proposition 03:** Individual careers are created through significant interactions among peers; show a large number of skills and experiences and interactions; are characterized by non-linearity of the career path, broken symmetry, and non-holonomic constraints.

The networked, virtual or boundaryless nature of organizations, the focus on information rather than on other resources, empowerment allowed at work environments, self-management and individual desire to achieve individual goals have led individual careers in organizations to acquire the characteristics of autopoietic systems.

With these three propositions, the present study postulates the fact that individual careers in contemporary organizations are a self-productive complex whole that is naturally selected and retained by the environment. This view is depicted in the following figure.

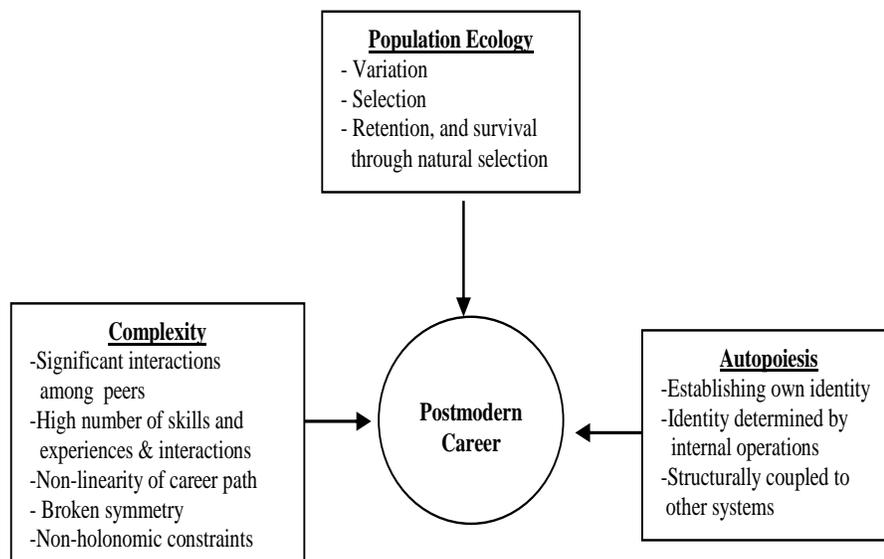


Fig I. Natural selection of contemporary career

The present study sets forth the view that individual career of the new generation of workers emerges and survives through the afore-mentioned forces.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I propose that the individual career does not smoothly progressing upward in a linear and orderly path throughout the individual life span, but evolves through complex patterns of relations, interactions and asymmetries. Furthermore, I posit that individual careers in contemporary new designs of organizations evolve by themselves. Thus, I propose that individual careers in contemporary organizations progress through a process of natural selection in which no single organization interferes intentionally in a single person's career. Moreover, the paper explicates the complex and autopoietic nature of the individual career.

The present study implies several facts that are of worth to organizational practitioners as well as theorists. It

presents the simple view that if individuals have a proclivity to acquire various skills, a variety of knowledge and a wide range of experiences, and they prefer to engage in a variety of jobs even on an assignment basis, then organizations seem to have the opportunity for employing a multi-skilled labor force with non-linear careers. Thus, it is implied that organizations can easily hunt for multi-skilled employees even for temporary positions.

The mechanism of natural selection will automatically be activated to absorb the most appropriate people for organizations. It is implied that raising the quality requirements of labor, organizations can easily upgrade the quality of their required labor. Since individual careers are unstable entities with continuous internal self-organizing processes, they could easily respond to such demands.

Since postmodern individuals are becoming more and more involved with various institutions (e.g. educational, employment etc.) in order to hone the structure of their careers, it is implied that such entities play a major role in upgrading the expected level of standards of employees, going beyond the traditional school-industry interface in producing people for industrial requirements.

The co-evolution process of the individual career would ensure a continuous flow of competent employees for the desired ends of modern and contemporary organizations.

As directions to further studies, it is suggested that an empirical investigation be conducted by testing the view presented in the present study. Further, the same theoretical basis can be furthered to focus on studies of intellectual capital and knowledge creation within organizations. More specifically, human resource management in contemporary organizations can be enriched with the same ground-level theories used in the present study.

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